

WRITTEN MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

DEPARTMENT FOR COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Infrastructure Bill

Minister of State for Housing and Planning for Communities and Local Government (Brandon Lewis): My hon Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Communities and Local Government (Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon) has made the following Written Ministerial Statement:

I wish to update the House on an aspect of the Infrastructure Bill, on behalf of the Department for Communities and Local Government and my noble Friend, Lord De Mauley, of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Better use of previously used, brownfield land is at the heart of the Coalition Government's planning reforms. Our ambition is for there to be permissions in place to accommodate 200,000 new homes on suitable brownfield land by 2020. The Government is committed to playing its part, ensuring that where it owns land that it no longer needs, this land is returned to economic use more quickly and effectively, building homes and creating jobs. Better use of this type of land will support our desire to protect the Green Belt and amenity land, such as forests, woodlands and open spaces.

We are committed to continuing to improve and accelerate this programme, removing the internal government bureaucracy that causes delays and impedes progress. From 2015, this will mean transferring a significant amount of land from Government departments and their arm's length bodies to the Homes and Communities Agency. These transfers will enable the Homes and Communities Agency to prepare that land for release to market, promoting house building and boosting economic growth.

Currently, land held by Government's existing arm's length bodies cannot transfer directly to the Homes and Communities Agency, and instead must transfer first to the parent department, before it can then transfer to the Agency. Clause 21 of the Infrastructure Bill which is currently working its way through Parliament, aims to simplify this process and reduce bureaucracy so that land owned by arm's length bodies can be transferred directly to the Homes and Communities Agency without having to go through the parent Department. The bodies that will be able to transfer land to the Agency are to be named in regulations.

There has been some suggestion that this minor adjustment to the Government's existing powers to transfer land presents a threat to the future of the nation's publicly-owned forests. It does not, and Ministers would like to make this crystal clear. The intention behind the clause is not to sell off socially or environmentally important publicly-owned land such as the nation's forests. These forests are not surplus, they are in use and the new powers will not be used for this purpose.

The Government recognises the significant social, environmental and economic value of the Public Forest Estate to the nation and made a clear public commitment, in its Forestry and Woodlands Policy Statement in 2013, to establish a new operationally-independent body to own and manage the estate, holding it "in trust for the nation". This commitment reflects the recommendations of the Independent Panel on Forestry, which the Government established in 2011, under the leadership of the then Bishop of Liverpool, with a remit to advise on the future direction of forestry and woodland policy in England.

The Government has worked closely with partners to develop plans for the new body but it was not in the end possible to accommodate the necessary legislation within the current parliamentary programme. However, the Government remains fully committed to the objective of establishing the new Public Forest Estate management body.

The Government has no plans to dispose of the Public Forest Estate and the powers contained in Clause 21 of the Infrastructure Bill do not present a threat to the future of the estate in public hands. The estate is not surplus, it is not owned by an arm's-length body and very little of the Public Forest Estate would be suitable for housing development under the Homes and Communities Agency's remit.

The Government recognises, however, the strength of people's concerns about the future security of the Public Forest Estate, and commits to:

1. Not transferring any part of the Public Forest Estate to the Homes and Communities Agency while the land remains in its ownership; and
2. Not including the new Public Forest Estate management body in any future regulations specifying which bodies can transfer land to the Homes and Communities Agency.

I hope this clear public commitment by the Government provides certainty and reassurance for noble peers and the wider public.